

What Was Paul's Christology?

by Servetus the Evangelical

The Apostle Paul espouses different, yet quite complementary, christologies in his New Testament (NT) letters. Yet none of them identify Jesus as God, and some of them indicate that Jesus cannot be God.

First, Paul writes of "Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4.4), adding that "He is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1.15). Some Christians have thought that Jesus being "the image of God" indicates that he is God. On the contrary, "God created man in His own image," (Genesis 1.27), but that did not make Adam and Eve Gods. Geza Vermes rightly states, "Paul described Christ as the 'likeness,' or icon, of God ... it cannot be taken as being anywhere close to inferring divinity." Logically, Jesus cannot be both the image of God and God Himself, who is invisible to mortals.

Second, Paul is unique in the NT by contrasting Jesus with Adam (Romans 5.14-19; 1 Corinthians 15.45-47; cf. Philippians 2.6). Scholars call this an "Adam Christology." Paul characterizes Jesus as the ideal, archetypal man and Adam as the fallen man who brought ruination to the earth and all of humankind. What Adam lost through his fall, Jesus more than gained by means of his obedient, righteous life, suffering, and atoning death for us.

Many church fathers claimed that Jesus had to be God to live sinless and become the perfect sacrifice for our sins. But this notion is arbitrary, without scriptural support, and contrary to Adam Christology. Dutch theologian Ellen Flesseman-van Leer believes the NT does not identify Jesus as God. She explains that Jesus' "complete obedience was not superhuman, ... Jesus acted in harmony with being man, ... and we act in conflict with it."

Plus, Jesus had to be tempted (Matthew 4.1-11; Hebrews 2.18; 4.15), as Adam was; yet Jesus cannot be God because "God cannot be tempted by evil" (James 1.13).

Many Bible readers, even scholars, have thought that Paul describes Jesus as having preexisted, mostly due to his apparent involvement in creation (1 Corinthians 8.6; Colossians 1.16), and they have concluded that preexistence indicates deity. But Trinitarian D.A. Carson states categorically, "pre-existence does not entail deity."

Indeed, Second Temple Judaism regarded certain pious men as having preexisted, yet Jews did not think this compromised their monotheism. Karl-Josef Kuschel contends that "there is no sign of any unambiguous and explicit statement about pre-existence in the Christology outlined by Paul." And while Paul writes of God sending his Son (Galatians 4.4), this merely reflects the prophetic tradition of divine commissioning. James Dunn insists, "There is no good evidence that Jesus thought of himself as a pre-existent being." Dunn concludes that Paul's language of preexistence is personified Wisdom.

Furthermore, Jesus could not have preexisted since he had to be a complete type of Adam to be the ideal man. The author of Hebrews states that Jesus "had to be made like His brethren in all things, ... to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2.17). Thus, Jesus could not have preexisted because he was like us, who did not preexist.

So, Adam Christology is nullified if Jesus is essentially different from Adam. That is, Jesus cannot rationally be compared to Adam if Jesus is a God-man; rather, they must be exact parallels. Is this why many traditionalists refrain from adopting Adam Christology?

Third, Paul affirms an exclusive God-in-Christ Christology. He writes specifically of “God in Christ” (Ephesians 4.32; 1 Thessalonians 2.14). And he explains that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5.19).

Exclusive God-in-Christ Christology is theocentric and the opposite of God-is-Christ Christology, which is christocentric. Hans Kung says Paul’s “christocentricity remains grounded in and culminates in a theocentricity: ‘from God through Jesus Christ.’”

It should be obvious that God being in Christ does not make Christ God anymore than both God and Christ indwelling believers makes them gods or christs. Paul’s favorite expression for the concept of the spiritual position of believers is that they are “in Christ.”

Thus, for Paul, Jesus is the perfect image of God primarily because God, in all of his fullness, dwells in Christ (Colossians 1.19; 2.9), which does not make Christ God.

Fourth, Paul espouses a Lordship Christology. He is unique as a NT author in that he repeatedly and exclusively calls the Father “God” and Jesus “Lord.” In fact, “Jesus is Lord” was the dominant creedal statement of the early church.

What did these early Christians mean by calling Jesus “Lord”? They meant he should be obeyed in his instruction in righteousness (Matthew 5.17-20; 7.21-23). The risen Jesus said, “All authority is given to Me in heaven and on earth” (28.18; cf. John 16.15; 17.10).

Many traditionalists have contended that the NT designating Jesus as Lord indicates that he is God because the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible in the 3rd century BCE—translates *kyrios*, meaning “Lord,” for *yhwh*, the Hebrew name for God. But Paul provides no evidence that this is how he applies *kyrios* to Jesus. James Dunn explains regarding this word in Paul’s letters, “*kyrios* is not so much a way of identifying Jesus with God, but if anything more a way of *distinguishing* Jesus from God.”

Some scholars claim that Paul’s occasional practice of applying Old Testament texts about Yahweh (*yhwh*) to Jesus indicates that he believed Jesus was Yahweh. But most of these instances only indicate that Jesus represents Yahweh as his agent par excellence.

Fourth, Paul affirms a Subordination Christology. He says “Christ belongs to God” and “God is the head of Christ” (1 Corinthians 3.23; 11.3). He also writes that God the Father “is the blessed and only Sovereign” (1 Timothy 6.15). And Paul says of the future, that Jesus “delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father,... then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him” (1 Corinthians 15.24, 28). Robin Scroggs explains that the Father “remains the only and single power who is God.”